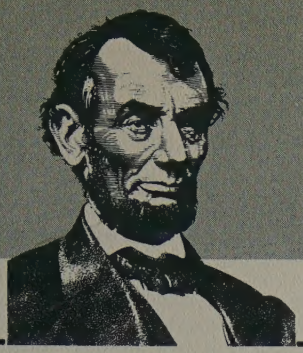

Lincoln Lore

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THE CLAY BATTALION

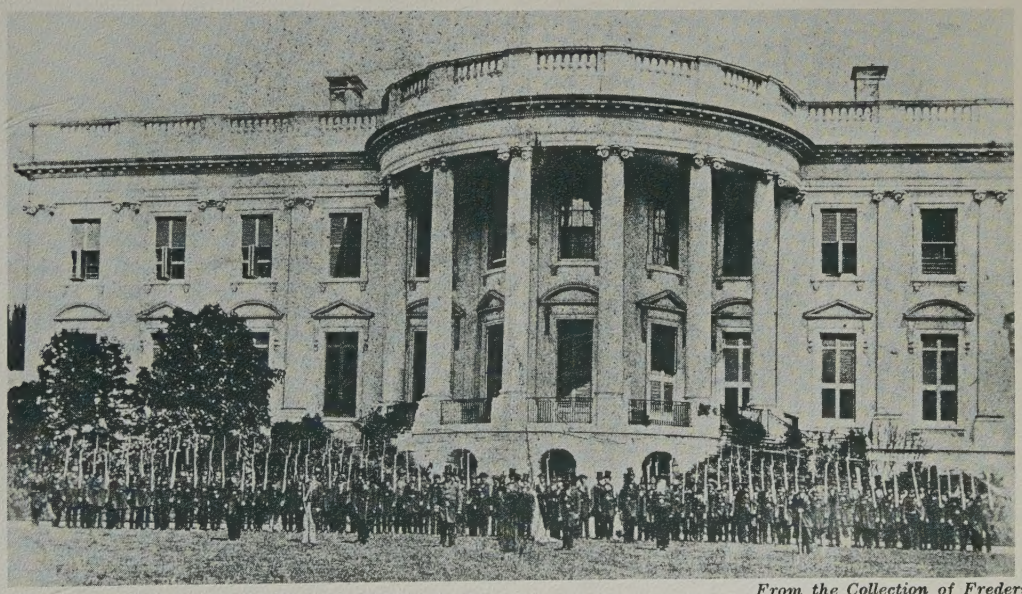
With the firing on Fort Sumter and President Abraham Lincoln's call for volunteers Virginia seceded from the Union on April 17, 1861 bringing the frontier of the Confederacy to the very doorsteps of the capital. Disaster followed disaster with the burning and abandonment of the arsenal at Harper's Ferry on April 18, the Baltimore Riot on April 19, and the destruction of the Gosport Naval Yard at Norfolk on April 20.

The city of Washington found itself in a precarious position. With only a company of regulars from Minnesota and a small detachment of unarmed Pennsylvania volunteers the capital city had no defense against assault from without or treason from within. To give some semblance of military force the Lincoln government made arms available to all patriotic citizens who would offer their service in the defense of Washington.

Cassius Marcellus Clay, the newly appointed minister plenipotentiary to Russia, delayed sailing to his new post to protect the capital city. James H. Lane, the newly elected Senator of Kansas also heeded the call and with Clay's "Company" and Lane's "Headquarters Frontier Guard" Washington was saved during the crisis that lasted approximately ten days. During this period Clay commanded both of the military units which he called a battalion.

John Hay gave an interesting description of Clay and Lane in his *Diary*. Under the date of April 22, 1861 Hay wrote: "It was melodramatic to see Cassius Clay come into the president's reception room today. He wore, with a sublimely unconscious air, three pistols and an Arkansas tooth pick, and looked like an admirable vignette to 25 cents worth of yellow-covered romance." Clay in his autobiography, "The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay: Memoirs, Writings, and Speeches," J. Fletcher Brennan & Co., Cincinnati, 1886, stated that at this time he wore his "Accustomed Bowie-Knife" and kept a fine pair of Colt's revolvers in his bed-room. As to Lane, Hay recorded under the date of April 18, 1861 that James Lane "walked proudly up and down the ranks with a new sword that the major (David Hunter) had given him." Incidentally John Hay, who was one of Lincoln's private secretaries, recorded the information that, "the major had made me his aid, and I labored under some uncertainty as to whether I should speak to privates or not."

Clay's company of "rollacking young adventurers" had their headquarters at Willard's Hotel where Clay occupied a parlor and bed-room. The ballroom was their drill hall. As each volunteer was enlisted into the service, Clay gave them the secret pass-word and "no person whatever was entered on the roll whose loyalty was not sustained by our several friends." Apparently a roster of recruits was kept by Professor Amasa McCoy, who served as secretary of the battalion, but it is evidently not extant. Clay stated that no oaths were taken. Later



From the Collection of Frederick Hill Meserve

The citizen-soldiers of the Cassius M. Clay Battalion, photographed at the rear of the White House by a government photographer on April 29, 1861. President Lincoln is said to be standing here (See tall man directly in front of the third column from the left) with members of his cabinet and other distinguished officials. Mrs. Lincoln is also believed by some to be peering out of a second story window (third from the left). This photograph was first published in "Old Cane Springs, A Story of the War Between the States in Madison County, Kentucky (1936-1937)" by Dr. Jonathan Truman Dorris of Richmond, Kentucky. Meserve No. 125, Supplement Number Four, "The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln", New York, 1955.

on some of Clay's men were quartered in the White House. The armory was located in a Baptist Church, which was once a theatre and Clay stated that "when the force was sufficient, the companies were organized. Had about as many as the old theatre would hold." Hay gave an interesting word picture of these citizen soliders: "It is amusing to drop in some evenings at Clay's armory. The raw patriots lounge elegantly on the benches, drink coffee in the ante-room, change the boots of unconscious sleepers in the hall, scribble busily in editorial notebooks, while the sentries snore at the doors, and the grizzled captain talks politics on the raised platform, and dreams of border battle and the hot noons of Monterey."

Lane's "Frontier Guard" was quartered in the East Room of the White House. Clay's "Battalion" which incorporated Lane's "Guard" was assigned to protect the Capitol and the White House. These military units were far from useless because during this crisis it was highly important that some military force be visibly present in Washington. Clay's real opportunity to meet the enemy came when Secretary of State Seward asked him to reconnoiter toward Baltimore. However, when Clay asked for artillery the matter was dropped.

Perhaps the most unlikely recruit in Clay's "Battalion" was Adam Gurowski, an exiled Polish count who likewise kept a *Diary*: "I entered the thus called Cassius Clay Company, organized for the defense of Washington until troops came. For several days patrolled, drilled, and lay several nights on the hard floor. Had compensation, that the drill often reproduced Falstaff's heroes. But my campaigners would have fought well in case of emergencies. Most of them officeseekers."

Undoubtedly the most accurate and detailed account of Clay's Battalion was incorporated in a paper read before a Chicago group in 1862 by W. M. Zearing, who served under the colorful Kentuckian. Zearing's twenty-two page manuscript, in the Foundation collection, contains some introductory remarks concerning the general hostilities and the activities of the Knights of the Golden Circle, who "reveled in visions of Knights and garters" and who "were going to have all labor performed by steam and negroes." His introductory remarks continued: "They concluded that when the fourth of March message of President Lincoln came, they would know how far they could go, from its tone. President Lincoln informed me before that time, in his office at Springfield what his views were in case any portion of the South disturbed United States property. The message came and John C. Breckinridge and other traitors inspected it closely and argued over all its points and came to the conclusion they were much perplexed and desired light upon the subject. The giant Douglas assured and reassured them that it admitted of no other interpretation than that of peace and security to every law abiding citizen."

Zearing next gave an account of his service under Clay and the political and military situation then existing in Washington: "In the beginning of the month of April Cassius M. Clay was stopping at the same hotel with myself at Willard's and he suggested to the administration the propriety of declaring military law over the city and, they replied, it would not be politic owing to the position we were then in. Mr. Clay then organized our company of Washington Clay Guards, composed of several ex-governors, Governor Bebb of Tennessee, General Nye of New York and others, and all true, tried and loyal men."

Thirty-six hours after the company of soldiers was organized Clay informed Zearing that the secessionists had the names of every member of the company. This information, however, was of no significance to Zearing. However, the young man did relate that "Sneers and frowns were visited upon us by many of the residents and non-resident secessionists—though many of the secessionists in the city spoke favorably of our company in serving to protect them and the city which they expected hourly to be shelled. There was a marked contrast in the appearance of the city in April and March, especially at the Inauguration on the 4th of March and in the evening at the Inaugural party where many chased the glowing hours with flying feet. In fact during April it was more like the reign of terror in France—a solemn silence and awe reigned over the city—few persons were seen in conversation even at the hotels which were crowded. The Government had probably not to exceed twenty-five hundred men and in case that number of thousand men were precipitated upon us from Virginia we would be at the mercy of the invaders, without hope of successful resistance. I think I lived about ten years in that month."

Sunday, April 21 was a day filled with gloom and foreboding. Zearing related the details: "While on my way to church, the city was in profound quiet and every moment it was expected the capital would be attacked by the secessionists. The most dread consternation reigned and soon the deep thunder tone of cannon sounded and the report spread that it was the signal for secessionists to leave the city and join the companies coming from Virginia. I repaired to my hotel and met Col. Clay who gave the command for every man to repair to the Armory (which was in the Baptist Church). Our company rallied and with brace of pistols, cartridge box and carbine rifles we were detailed singly (not having enough of men to have two or more together) to go over hills and vales and scour the banks of the Potomac in the damp mist until eleven o'clock at night. We encountered that evening no foe except a number of secessionists going from the city and the deleterious night air. At eleven p.m. I came back with Mr. Clay and took supper at the hotel and he said we would not go out again, but remain up, during the night." Zearing admired Clay, and he made

From The Lincoln National Life Foundation

CASSIUS MARCELLUS CLAY
Major-General U. S. Volunteers

On March 28, 1861, Clay was appointed Minister to Russia but delayed his sailing date to assume command of the Clay Battalion in Washington, D. C. He returned to the United States in June, 1862 having been commissioned a major-general of volunteers. He resigned his commission on March 11, 1863 and was again sent as Minister to Russia where he remained until September 25, 1869.

the comment that "Cassius Clay is a gentleman of talent and true courage and in a battle will not be fired on in the rear."

April 25, (Clay gave the date of April 24th) likewise, held exciting adventures for Zearing: "On the 25th of April a great many traitors had recently resigned at the Navy Yard, and fears were entertained it would be attacked as it was materially weakened by resignations. Our company marched out to the Navy Yard and stood guard around the Navy Yard situated on a branch of the Potomac from ten o'clock that evening to six o'clock the next morning. The wind blew quite fierce. I began to think there was more prose than poetry in a soldier's life engaged in active duty."

Perhaps the most exciting incident of Zearing's entire service under Clay occurred in the vicinity of the White House: "On the night of 26th April some Germans saw pistols fired in the rear of the President's house—and we soon found ourselves lodging in the White House and as we filed into the magnificent rooms of the Executive Mansion, every man registered a vow that so long as he had a drop of blood in his veins, not one hair of the Chief Magistrate of the land should be injured."

A further insight into the tense political life of Washington was related by Zearing: "Up to this time the Editor of the *States Union* was publishing an open, bitter and avowed secession paper, and in the evening at Willard's hotel he brought to task the Editor of the Washington *Star* for publishing that it was expected his sheet would soon cease to be whereupon a heated controversy sprang up and each drew pistols and the Editor of the *Star* said he only expressed it as an opinion and the secession editor replied, 'Then let us go and take a drink.'"

The day before Zearing's discharge on April 29, he spent an interesting Sunday in Washington: "On Sunday 28th April we formed in line at our hotel and marched up to the Capitol to cheer up our brother soldiers who were stopping there. We then went up to the Patent office and saw Gov. Sprague and Colonel Burnside's regiment of Rhode Island guards, and we drilled before them awhile and Col. Burnside concluded to return the compliment and after seeing them—we had no desire to be seen drilling in their presence. We then returned to our armory, and our Chaplain, Rev. Hoben, a baptist minister, preached from the Text—'Forgive them for they know not what they do.' He, intimated a general forgiveness should be desired except Jef. Davis (cheers and applause ensued) and he closed with prayer and singing the Star Spangled Banner."

With United States military companies converging on Washington from almost every direction the Clay Battalion had served its purpose. Zearing wrote: "It was a source of joy to almost all classes in the city to see the New York Seventh Regiment come to the relief of the city and the Massachusetts and Rhode Island Regiments." However, before the soldiers were discharged they had their photograph taken: "About the 29th of April the Government Photographer took a daguerreotype of our company as we stood at the south front of the President's Mansion and also changed our position and were taken with trees in the rear, the range of our guns appear too irregular, like cornstalks in a field, to appear well. We received for services etc. only about five hundred dollars, which scarcely paid expenses, and the war department said though it was in the United States service, there were technical objections to paying it—and the President said if it was not paid he would pay it himself, and it was allowed. We received lengthy discharges signed by our commander and the Secretary of War and President Lincoln which are very full in the recital of our labors against a horde of traitors within and without the city."

In presenting his paper to his Chicago audience in 1862 Zearing further revealed the serious situation that existed in the nation's capital, and he apparently had great respect for the abilities of General James H. Lane: "Under General James H. Lane we were obliged to do much more constant service, for it seemed that the greatest danger which ever threatened the country was at hand—we saw the traitorous schemes of the South bud and were the first to proclaim in the city of Washington defiance and war to the traitors of their country. At this time Washington was full of secessionists, who openly avowed their treason, advised concert of action with the South, and expressed their determination to possess the capitol at all hazards. Meetings of the conspirators were held nightly, and it was hardly safe for an unarmed Union man to go into certain quarters of the city. It was a time of peril; Heaven only knows what imminent danger hung over the capitol of this Nation like the sword of Damocles suspended only by a thread, and that a thread so frail.

"General Lane made one proposition to General Scott that should have been accepted. It was to allow us to go mounted on horse to Baltimore and through Maryland and establish peace and secure protection to property or perish in the attempt—General Scott disapproved this proposition insisting that there was too much secret and dangerous service to be performed nearer home than to go abroad. Every man was armed to the teeth, and went as scouts into Maryland and Virginia. Members were sent to Baltimore, Annapolis, Alexandria and other places in various disguises, learned the plans of the secessionists and prepared for them at all points."

Zearing's service in the Clay Battalion was concluded with a visit to the president: "We received an invitation to visit the President in a body in the East room of the White House. Col. Vaughan of the company addressed the President, saying that we had been in situations of trial and in this dark hour, had responded to our country's call, and were there to pledge our lives and fortunes to the support of the constitution and the vindication of the majesty of the law. Col. Vaughn said there were many in his own native state of South Carolina that yet love this Union, which has nourished and fostered them through so many years, but who dare not speak for treason and disunion were abroad in the land, and they were powerless. That every man there had instructed him to say, so far as they are concerned, 'No compromise with rebels.' The President replied in substance, 'I have desired as sincerely as any man, and I sometimes think more than any other man that our present difficulties might be settled without the shedding of blood. I will not say that all hope has yet gone, but if the alternative is presented whether the Union is to be broken in fragments and the liberties of the people lost, or blood be shed, you will probably make the choice with which I shall not be dissatisfied.'"

It was perhaps on this occasion that President Lincoln presented Clay with a Colt's revolver as a testimonial of his regard for the loyal service he and his battalion had rendered. Clay retained possession of the revolver over a long period of years and had it when he wrote his memoir in 1886.

Zearing received his honorable discharge on April 29, signed by James W. Nye. Clay is likewise known to have issued certificates for past service in the defense of Washington dated April 25, 1861. However, as early as April 27, General James H. Lane felt that the state of emergency had ceased. On the above mentioned date Simon Cameron, Secretary of War, wrote Lane the following letter: "In reply to your letter of this day's date, stating that, in consequence of the arrival of large numbers of troops in this city, the emergency has ceased which called the company commanded by you into service, and that you would be pleased therefore, to have authority to disband your company, and have an honorable discharge from service for it.

"Concurring fully with you I readily grant you the authority asked for, and, in doing so I beg to extend to you, and through you to the men under your command, the assurance of my high appreciation of the very prompt and patriotic manner in which your company was organized for the defense of the Capital, and the very efficient services rendered by it during the time of its existence." This letter in addition to Secretary Cameron's signature bears the notation "cheerfully approved—A. Lincoln."

Zearing and all but one of his fellow soldiers were happy to accept the "lengthy discharges signed by our commander and the Secretary of War and President Lincoln." Only Adam Gurowski "refused to take such a certificate . . . having had no occasion to fight."

See *Lincoln Lore* No. 102, March 23, 1931
"The Washington Clay Guards"

INDEX 1958

Adams, 1440; Adkins, 1450; Albright, P. G., 1448; Albright, Thomas, 1448; Alexander, 1444; Alexander the Great, 1448; Allen, Elizabeth, 1448; Allen, John, 1450; Allen, Leo, 1450; Almqvist, 1441; Ames, 1444; Anderson, 1447; Andrew, 1449; Angle, 1445; Aram, 1441; Arlt, 1444, 1446; Atherton, 1442.

Baker, 1446; Baldwin, 1447; Ball, 1446; Bancroft, 1440; Banks, 1440, 1447; Baringer, 1450; Barnum, 1443; Bartlett, 1441; Barton, 1447; Bates, 1441, 1447; Beaman, 1440; Bebb, 1450; Bell, 1443, 1445; Benin, 1448; Biossat, 1444; Birely, 1450; Blaine, 1440; Blair, 1447; Bollman, 1441; Bonelli, 1444; Boone, 1442; Boothe, 1443; Borglum, 1444; Bradley, 1449; Brandon, 1443; Breckinridge, 1443, 1445, 1450; Bristol, 1444; Broughton, 1441; Brown, C. D., 1443; Brown, E. H., 1444; Browning, 1440, 1443, 1447; Buchanan, 1441, 1443; Buckalew, 1440; Bulwer, 1443; Bunche, 1450; Bunyan, 1440; Burke, 1439; Burnham, 1446; Burnside, 1450; Butler, 1443.

Caesar, 1448; Caldwell, 1442; Cameron, 1450; Campbell, 1449; Cato, 1448; Chase, 1447, 1448; Chausier, 1443; Chelf, 1450; Cheops, 1443; Chiang Kai-Shek, 1447; Church, 1450; Clarke, 1440; Clay, Cassius, 1450; Clay, Henry, 1440, 1449; Colfax, 1444; Collamer, 1447; Colman, 1442; Confucius, 1440; Cooke, 1441; Coolidge, 1444; Cooper, 1450; Coriolanus, 1448; Corwin, 1442; Crawford, 1449; Crockett, 1446; Current, 1442; Curtis, 1444; Custer, 1442.

Danielle, 1446; Darling, 1449; D'Aulaire, Edgar, 1439; D'Aulaire, Ingri, 1439; Davis, Charles, 1443; Davis, Jefferson, 1441, 1443, 1446, 1450; Davis, Walter, 1439; Deming, 1440; Denton, 1450; Derby, 1446; Dickey, 1450; Dirksen, 1450; Dix, 1443, 1447; Dolliver, 1445; Doolittle, 1440; Dorris, 1450; Douglas, Paul, 1450; Douglas, Stephen, 1442, 1443, 1445, 1446, 1447, 1448, 1449, 1450; Duncan, 1449; Dunlap, 1445.

Eifert, 1445; Eldridge, 1447; Ellsworth, 1440; Eubank, 1439; Ewing, 1447.

Farwell, 1440; Fassett, 1441; Fessenden, 1440, 1447; Fillmore, 1441; Fisher, 1450; Foot, 1440; Forney, 1440; Foster, 1446; Franklin, 1444; Frazer, 1447; French, 1444.

Gannal, 1443; Gates, 1439, 1442, 1445, 1449; Glover, 1441; Goldberg, 1444; Grant, 1449; Gray, 1443; Grimes, 1447; Griswold, 1440; Grow, 1448; Gunderson, 1439; Gurley, 1448; Gurney, Jeremiah, 1443; Gurney, Jeremiah Jr., 1443; Gurowski, 1447, 1450; Guthrie, 1447.

Halbert, 1449; Hall, 1443; Halleck, 1441; Hamilton, 1445; Hamlin, 1445; Hanks, Dennis, 1449; Hanks, John, 1449; Hanks, Joseph, 1442; Harding, 1444; Harlan, 1446; Harris, 1440, 1447; Harrison, 1441; Harrold, 1443; Harwell, 1449; Haverlin, 1439, 1442, 1445, 1449; Hay, 1443, 1450; Haycraft, 1442; Hayes, 1448; Heintzelman, 1448; Henderson, J. H. D., 1440; Henderson, John B., 1440; Herndon, 1449; Hesler, 1441, 1444; Higby, 1440; Hills, 1448; Hoben, 1450; Hoffecker, 1442; Holt, Hallie, 1439; Holt, Joseph, 1448; Horton, 1448; House, 1445; Houser, 1439; Howard, 1447; Hunter, 1450.

Isabella, Queen of Spain, 1447.

Jackson, 1443; Janvier, 1448; Jay, 1440; Jefferson, 1440; Jenckes, 1440; Jenner, 1450; Jett, 1447; Johnson, 1440, 1441, 1443, 1446; Jordan, 1445; Joseph, 1442.

Kamehameha, King, 1447; Kasson, 1440; Kauffman, 1447; Kay, 1445; Kellogg, 1448; Kimmel, 1442; Kincaid, 1439, 1442; King, 1447; Knox, 1448; Kuebes, 1444; Kung, 1440; Kyle, 1442, 1449.

Lamon, Dorothy, 1448; Lamon, Ward, 1448; Lane, Henry, 1440; Lane, James, 1440, 1450; Lane, Joe, 1448; Laury, Mrs. 1441; Lee, 1445; Leib, 1445; Lieber, 1440; Lossing, 1446.

Lincoln, Abraham (president). Agriculture Department, 1441; Bancroft Oration, 1440; Cabinet Crisis—December 1862, 1447; Cabin on Boston Common, 1449; Cartoons, 1444; Clay Battalion, 1450; Editorials, 1444; Horse Breeding and Horse Racing, 1442; Invention for Buoying Vessels, 1440; Presidential Candidates, 1443; President's Proclamations, 1446; Rail Splitter, 1445; Wheeler's Recollections of Lincoln, 1448.

Lincoln, Abraham (grandfather), 1442; Bathsheba (grandmother), 1442; John (great grandfather), 1442; Josiah (uncle), 1442; Mary Todd (wife), 1440, 1441, 1443, 1450; Mordecai (uncle), 1442; Nancy Hanks (mother), 1442, 1443, 1444; Robert (son), 1443, 1446; Sarah (sister), 1444; Thomas (father), 1442, 1443, 1446, 1449; William (son), 1443.

Long, 1439, 1442, 1445, 1449; Lorant, 1442; Lufkin, 1439, 1442, 1445, 1449.

McClellan, 1441, 1449; McClernand, 1447; McClurg, 1440; McCook, 1446; McCoy, 1450; McCulloch, 1445; McCutcheon, 1444; McDonald, 1446; McKay, 1443; McKeehan, 1445; McKeever, 1448; McMurtry, 1439, 1442, 1445, 1449, 1450; McNeer, 1442; McPherson, 1440.

Mack, 1450; Madison, 1440; Maloney, 1444; Manship, 1442; Marquis of Drogheda, 1449; Marshall, John, 1440; Marshall, Samuel, 1447; Martin, 1445; Mason, 1448; Matthis, 1442; Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico, 1440; May, Henry, 1446; May, William, 1447; Meserve, 1440; 1441, 1443, 1444, 1450; Mezzara, 1443; Miller, 1449; Monaghan, 1442; Morrill, 1440; Morris, 1447; Morrow, 1445; Muelder, 1449; Mumford, 1450.

Napoleon Bonaparte, 1440; Nesmith, 1440; Newman, 1439, 1442, 1445, 1449; Newton, 1441; Neyhart, 1449; Nicholson, 1440; Nicolay, 1441, 1443, 1444; Nimtz, 1439, 1450; Nisbit, 1448; Nye, James, 1450; Nye, Russell, 1440.

O'Connell, 1442; Oglesby, 1449; Orr, 1443; Orth, 1440; Ossian, 1448; Ostendorf, 1444.

Paddock, 1439; Palmerston, 1440; Parrish, 1444; Patigian, 1443; Patterson, 1440; Payne, 1443; Pendleton, 1441; Pike, 1447; Pile, 1442; Poinier, 1444; Polk, 1449; Polonsky, 1445; Pomeroy, 1447; Pope, 1448; Pope Pius IX, 1440; Powell, 1450; Pratt, 1444; Prince of Wales, 1445; Pugh, 1449; Purtle, 1445; Putnam, 1441.

Ralston, 1447; Randall, 1449; Rawlinson, 1444; Reinert, 1450; Richard the First, 1448; Richelieu, 1443; Riddle, 1439, 1445; Rives, Capt. 1443; Rives, William, 1439; Roach, 1446; Robach, 1443; Robbins, Z. C., 1439, 1440; Robbins, Mrs. Z. C., 1439; Robinson, 1444; Robsion, 1450; Roosevelt, 1447; Rothschild, 1450; Russell, 1440; Rutledge, 1440; Rychman, 1444.

Sabin, 1448; Sagnet, 1443; St. Francis, 1448; Sandburg, 1439, 1446; Sands, 1443; Sang, Philip D., 1445; Sang, Mrs. Philip D., 1445; Saunders, 1441; Schack, 1444; Schaefer, 1440; Schenck, 1440; Schrage, 1444; Scott, Hugh, 1439; Scott, Walter, 1448; Scott, Winfield, 1448, 1450; Scripps, 1449; Seward, 1443, 1446, 1447, 1448; Shanklin, 1440; Shakespeare, 1448; Shanklin, 1440; Sheton, 1439; Shoaff, 1449; Shoemaker, 1444; Shutes, 1439; Sketchley, 1446; Slidell, 1448; Sloan, 1440; Smith, A. M., 1445; Smith, I. L., 1439; Smith, Margaret, 1444; Snyder, 1447; Sprague, 1450; Squire, 1445; Stanton, Edwin, 1440, 1443, 1444, 1448; Stanton, Lewis, 1443; Stern, 1445; Stevens, 1440; Stokes, 1442; Stone, 1443; Stratton, 1449, 1450; Sumner, 1447, 1448, 1449; Sun Yat-sen, 1447; Sylvester, 1440.

Taney, 1440, 1448; Taylor,—, 1446; Taylor, Zachary, 1439, 1441; Temple, 1449; Terrell, 1444; Thomas, Francis, 1440; Thomas, William, 1447; Thompson, 1447; Tisler, Aleita, 1449; Tisler, C. C., 1449; Tood, 1450; Townsend, Edward, 1443; Townsend, William, 1439, 1442, 1449, 1450; Troubetzkoy, 1442; Truesdell, 1444; Trumbull, 1447; Turgot, 1440; Tyler, 1447.

Ure, 1443.

Vail, 1444, 1446; Van Buren, 1447; Vanodi, 1443; Vaughan, 1450.

Wade, 1440, 1447; Walker, Frank, 1446, 1447; Walker, Isaac, 1447; Walton, 1439, 1442, 1445, 1447, 1449; Warren, 1442, 1446; Washburne, 1439, 1440; Washington, George, 1440, 1441; Washington, Martha, 1444; Webb, 1447; Webster, 1439, 1443; Welles, 1440; Wetherill, 1441; Whaley, 1440; Wheeler, 1448; Willey, 1440; Williams, John, 1439; William, T. Harry, 1439; Williamson, 1442; Wilson, Henry, 1440; Wilson, Woodrow, 1444; Windom, 1440; Wirth, 1450; Wood, 1444; Workman, 1439; Wright, 1440; von Wydenbruck, 1440; Wyles, 1442.

Yarborough, 1450; Yates, 1440; Yoes, 1444.

Zearing, 1450.

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Mr. John E. Allen, *Assistant Executive Director*
Dr. C. Percy Powell, *Research Director*

H. J. Res. 352 (Sec. 1): "Whereas it is incumbent upon the nation to provide for the proper observance of the birth of this great man who has continued to be a force in our history . . ." (Sec. 2): "It shall be the duty of the Commission to prepare an overall program to include specific plans for commemorating the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln."